A Visit to May Morris in London: Excerpts from John Quinn’s Diary of 1911

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When the Hirshhorn Museum of the Smithsonian Institution held a retrospective of John Quinn’s art collection between 15 June and 4 September 1978, it displayed some of the most important paintings of the first part of the twentieth century. Quinn owned work by most of the artists of the period: Brancusi, Braque, Cézanne, Derain, Marcel and André Duchamp, Duchamp-Villon, Dufy, Gaudier-Brzeska, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Manet, Matisse, Monet, Picasso, Rousseau, de Segonzac and Seurat. His manuscript collection, which was no less intriguing, included copies of William Morris’s *House of the Wolfings, Sigurd the Volsung* and *The Story of the Glittering Plain*; the complete works of Joseph Conrad; and James Joyce’s *Ulysses*.

John Quinn met May Morris in 1909, and a romantic relationship between them began almost immediately. However, by 1911—when Quinn took a long trip to Europe with Augustus John to visit friends, attend to some legal business, and buy art—the romance had lost its lustre for him. May remained very much in love though, and tried to continue the affair, not completely giving up on Quinn until 1917.

The entries in Quinn’s diary that refer to May date from 3rd to 6th of September 1911 when he was staying in England. Shortly after this he went to France where he hoped to meet Gwen John, the painter and sister of Augustus. Quinn had given Gwen John financial support, admired her work, and over the years purchased seventeen of her paintings including *Mère Marie Poussepin, Girl with a Blue Scarf* and *Girl reading at the Window*. Gwen John was an ‘absolute hermit’, Quinn wrote in his diary, and he failed to orchestrate a meeting. Although disappointed he did later arrange for her to meet Maud Gonne, a good friend of his, and the two had tea together on 23 April 1915.

For the rest of his trip Quinn turned his attention to learning about and buying art. He purchased seven Manet drawings, and wrote of his enchantment with the work of Pierre Puvis de Chavannes. Quinn later bought ten of de Chavannes’s paintings, including *Beheading of St. John the Baptist, La Rivière* and *Le Vendange*. By this time his thoughts were no longer on England or William Morris’s daughter.

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Sunday 3 September 1911:
Got up at 10 in the morning, a lovely day. Read the *Sunday Times* and the *Observer*. Breakfasted in my room. At one o’clock I went down and ordered lunch for two. In a few minutes MM. came and we had a very pleasant lunch. She had brought with her two maps for our proposed motor trip. She had been proof reading the *Odyssey* all morning. She told me Longmans paid her only £10 each for editing and writing...
the introductions to each volume [of the Collected Works]. She has been over a year now, hard at work, with no vacation, on the first 12 vols. So she gets less than a typewriter and besides she has to pay her own expenses for typewriting, copying, stenography & so on. I said the most unsatisfactory part of the life [i.e. Mackail's Life of William Morris] was to me the socialist part of Vol. 2. She said that was interesting and was precisely her view: Mackail had learned his socialism in writing the book and so his account was somewhat confused. MM. had a great deal of hesitation about quoting letters that M. had already used, even though she copied them from the originals and not from the book.' I told her that was pure nonsense, that the literary property in the letters was in her father; that M. was only a licensee and that as she was acting for the estate, she had a higher right than ever M. had. That made her feel easier. Told me of all sorts of difficulties made by Magnësson in the work; wanted to make so many corrections as to amount to a rewriting. She refused; then he threatened to withhold permission to republish; finally he had to be paid 'a considerable sum,' much more than she got, for making a list of corrections and writing some notes. She said 'it was a pity her father had not fallen in with a real scholar which M. was not: He is at Cambridge now, sort of a sub-librarian and quite superannuated.'

Took the big touring car at 2 o'clock and drove to the Tate Gallery - a modern building but looks 200 years old....

The pictures by Millais were very bad - candy face, cheap confectionary, sentimental to the last degree. Watts grandiose but not satisfying technically except in his portraits - which were very fine. MM. pointed out quietly the portrait of her mother by D.G.R. - a magnificent thing. The hands are especially fine. The face I thought a little too pretty but the colour was splendid, and the whole picture a splendidly rich picture of a beautiful woman. MM. now has the bracelet that Mrs. M. wore when she posed for the picture. It is dated 1868 but MM. said they got it in 1871.

By 3 o'clock off through Chelsea, across Putney Bridge and for a wonderful drive through Richmond Park; grass dry but many splendid oak trees, hundreds of deer in groups here and there. Came out at Star & Garter Inn at Richmond, now closed and to be sold, and then through Twickenham and on to Windsor... MM. told of Lord Carlisle her friend - town house, country place Castle Howard, where the famous 'heavenly beautiful' Mabuse came from & place in Scotland. He died a few months ago. His son feels poor so they sold this picture but they have many more in Castle Howard. Back by 5 o'clock by the Hounslow road to London. MM. got off at Black Lion Lane H[ammersmith]. She pointed out the place in H[ammersmith] where they lived before they took K[emscott House]. It was a little place with a garden - now torn down & a street through it. The County Council had put up a tablet at the R.L.S. in honor of her father....

Monday 4 September 1911. Ritz Hotel, Piccadilly:
A perfect day... Telephoned MM. at 10:20. She arrived at the Ritz at 11 o'clock. Went to the shop of William Morris & Co. Introduced by MM. to Marillier who owns a large interest in the shop. Saw a beautiful drawing of Wm. M. Some fine small tiles. Wall-paper and carpets very bad - poor colours & too blue and cheerless and depressing. Tapestry very bad and altar pieces & semi-circular large tapestry - worked on - 'very close' - by one man for two years. MM. does not like Marillier; he jaws
down her work-people, men & women. Well [sic; Webb], who was an architect, is now old. He used to design the furniture, fenders and so on. Supposed to be very fine. MM. offered when her father died to take an interest in the business and give her time – 'to keep it straight' – but they did not seem to care for it. Went in a taxi (in a light rain) to Druce & Co. some good old furniture – tables & chairs and china closets – but no chests. Tried to locate Lovengard in Bond Street but failed. Left MM. at the Ritz at 12:45. She went to the South Kensington Museum to see Eric MacLagan who is one of the officials there now in the art department. I met him in the Autumn of 1904 at Yeats place 18 Woburn Buildings. Son of the then Archbishop of York – was editing Blake and had translated Villiers de L'Isle Adam's 'Axel'...

Back to the Ritz about 6.30 & telephoned to MM. Wanted me to dine with her but said I had an engagement at 9.30. Suggested a restaurant near her place but she said she would be glad to have me dine with her if I would take pot luck. Just as I was leaving the hotel [Augustus] John came dashing up in a taxi. A girl was in it – one of his models, because I recognised her from the drawings. He said he would meet me at the Cafe Royal at 10 o'clock. I went in my taxi to 8 Hammersmith Terrace to dine with MM. who looked charming in a simple gown of Greek pattern but not white – pale pink stripes in cream-coloured body. The moon was up and the little garden looking out on the river was very fine. The tide was out and there was a fine tang of the salt water coming into the open windows from the river. K[elmscott] House is only a block or two further down the Thames and she said she lived down there because it was cheap and near the river and for old association's sake. I asked her how long she had lived down there & she seemed pensive and said 21 years. That would be about 1890. The dinner bell sounded and we had a deliciously simple meal – chops – potatoes – salad – no soup – light Rhine wine – cheese straws and Turkish coffee. She had stewed peaches and fresh fruit. The house seems to be without lamps – has no gas or electricity – and her only light seems to be candles. She has a lot of fine candlesticks. A lot of very interesting talk of her father. His great generosity – to Lady B[urne]-Jones. B-J gave her the Omar K[hayyam] illuminated ms.; the [Virgil?]; the Sigurd ms.; the 2 vols of his translation of Lancelot du Lac and other priceless things. She said she remembered a long long time ago saying to L[ady] B-J. that she wished her father would give her some of these beautiful things and L. B-J. said, 'Oh, that would be like keeping them oneself.' MM. said that is of course one point of view.

She had some of her father's stained glass – from his own designs – a big window broken up by M[arillier] and sold before she knew... We talked a lot about furniture and MM. said, 'You seem to think you can buy anything with money.' I disabused her of that notion.

In her drawing room I smoked a big cigar. No one smokes cigars there – only cigarettes. Wanted me to see Fairfax Murray. He is a painter and a collector. He used to colour the stained glass for Wm. M. MM. said she thought he was interested in Agnew's art shop....

Tuesday 5 September 1911:
At 12 o'clock went down [from room at the Ritz] to find MM. Went to call on Fairfax Murray but found him out... Lunched at 1:30 at the Ritz. [Read] a letter of Cockerell's to MM re letters. Advised 'pure rubbish' altho. she had 'paid very
handsomely for them.' (Monday evening MM wanted no watch in bust but a little ring. 'Make believe it is serious'). Put MM in taxi at 2:15 & got taxi and went to City – 32 Nicholas Lane.

Wednesday 6 September 1911:
Tel MM. agreed to meet at 1. at Kettners 'where Wilde used to go'. ... lunched with MM 1 to 1:45. Spoke of returning and giving some time to friends – 'For Heaven's sake don't give all your time or spare me some of you time – or I'll go crazy.' The only outbreak she made this time. To station: John: woman: carnage: on boat: revolver: play in a big way....

This intriguing comment about the circumstances surrounding the beginning of Quinn's voyage to the continent is easily explained. Apparently, Quinn had told Mme. Frida Strindberg (wife of the Swedish dramatist) about his impending trip from England to France with Augustus John. Frida Strindberg had long been intimate with John and had attempted suicide when he had jilted her. She had recovered quickly and was now angry that her lover was deserting her. She arrived at the channel steamer in time to make a scene. John had to lock himself in his cabin while Quinn handled the unpleasantries.3

John Quinn's love for May Morris was short-lived. However, their correspondence from 1910 to 1917 indicates that he was sincerely interested in her editorial projects and supported her endeavours: both emotionally and financially. Although his journal entries from the 1911 trip imply that he would have liked to have extricated himself from any romantic entanglement with May, Quinn had a real concern that Longmans publishing house was not treating her fairly. This interest in her work was of small consolation to May who took eight long years to realise that she had not chosen wisely.

NOTES
1 I would like to thank Quinn's grandnephew, Thomas Conroy, for permission to publish excerpts of the late B. L. Reid's transcription of Quinn's 1911 diary. The location of the original diary is not known. Thanks are also due to the State University of New York at Potsdam and the Independent Scholars' Center of the Associated Colleges of St. Lawrence Valley for their continued support of my work.
4 Richard and Janis Londraville are currently editing the Quinn-Gonne letters for publication.